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# **Understanding Social Justice Learning in Context: The Usefulness of Complexity Thinking and Social Movement Learning Theories**

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Keywords: complexity thinking, social justice, social movement learning theories, life history

**Abstract:** This study explores the usefulness of complexity thinking/enactivism and social movement learning theories to explain the learning of a commitment to social justice of two white, female, privileged adult educators. Analysis of their life history data showed the value of understanding learning as simultaneous, nested learning processes that co-emerge with the learning context. Theories of learning within social movements were also useful to explain some of the participants’ learning through individual and collective levels of learning, politicized experience, and identity development.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the usefulness of enactivism/complexity thinking and theories of learning in social movements to explain the learning of privileged white, female adult educators as they learned a commitment to social justice. The findings have implications for expanding the theoretical frameworks available for understanding adult learning and for supporting education for social justice.

## **Relevant Literature**

Theorists in the field of adult education are moving toward learning theories that integrate individual and contextual aspects of learning. Most recently, Merriam (2008) points to the value of theoretical approaches which understand learning as a multidimensional process and pay greater attention to the learning context. The approach of complexity thinking addresses these concerns.

Complexity thinking posits the co-emergence of beings and their environments, in which each simultaneously co-creates the other. This interaction occurs simultaneously at all nested levels from bodily subsystems, to the body, to collectivities, to societies, the species, and the biosphere (Davis & Sumara, 2006). Learning occurs in this process of interactions between beings and their environments, eliminating the dichotomy of individual and context.

Initial studies using this framework (Davis & Sumara, 2006) suggest the usefulness of the approach. Davis and Sumara identify several advantages of using this as a research tool, including the ability to study different levels of learning simultaneously and to draw on research from many disciplines, including neuroscience, psychology and sociology. Fenwick (2003) describes enactivism as a way to understand experiential learning that “re-embodies” the learning process and helps us understand learning in social movement struggles.

Limited empirical research has been conducted about learning in social movements, but useful theoretical frameworks are emerging. Gouin (2009) expanded on Foley's (1999) framework of analyzing learning within social struggles by situating politicized personal experience as the starting point for understanding how people in collective struggles learn about and analyze interlocking systems of oppression. The frameworks of moral identity development, collective identity and movement identity (Sandlin & Walther, 2009; Kilgore, 1999) and Chovanec's (2009) approach to political consciousness are also valuable frameworks for understanding the development of people's commitment to social justice.

### **Research Design**

This research design is a collaborative life history project based in self study. This method of inquiry takes a decidedly "insider perspective" by developing a "knowledge base grounded in research methods and strategies that give voice to the particularities of practice contexts" (Dirkx, 2006, p. 273). The purpose of self-study methodology is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate voice (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001), and self-study methods are most often used by educators to advance knowledge of effective practices (Louise, Drevdahl, Purdy & Stackman, 2003). As adult educators, we wish to improve our practice by understanding why we, as white, privileged females, strive for equity and fairness, even when potential social change may not benefit us directly. Thus, our research questions were:

1. How did we learn our commitment to social justice? What key life events, interactions, and processes stand out as important in this learning process?
2. How do theories of enactivism and learning in social movements help explain the development of a person's commitment to social justice?

Using life history methods, we seek to represent perceptions and effects of particular life events to gain greater understanding of our learning a commitment to social justice (Glesne, 2006). Janesick (2010) believes that the power of life history research "resides in the meaning made of the storytelling and what we learn from the stories" (p.1). To extract these stories, the two participants engaged in reflective journaling over a period of three months, shared their journals, and met to discuss the contents and learning processes. The meetings and journals were used as data sources.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

The authors could identify key events and processes that shaped their commitment to social justice. These were very different for each educator. Peggy's childhood was spent in Madison, Wisconsin, during the 1960s and 1970s, and was strongly shaped by the social movements that were active there during those years. Childhood memories include successes in environmental protection through her father's and others' work in environmental issues, protest marches, a bombing, the US's withdrawal from Vietnam, her mother going on a successful strike with her teachers' union, and seeing discriminatory race laws being changed. Peggy's commitment to social justice was further shaped by church participation but most importantly by her own experience reading the gospel of Luke as a catechism class assignment. This reading stands out because of her own mental and somatic connection to the text, but also because this reading created tension between her interpretation of the text and the actions and structures she observed within her church, which did not seem to be working toward the economic justice

described by Jesus. In addition, she discovered that women couldn't be ordained, which "put a huge mark on [her] consciousness about gender discrimination". She discusses how her interpretation of Luke influenced her own alignment with liberation theology, how subsequent classes and teachers shaped "a deeper understanding of the progressive economic and political messages in the gospels", and how working in Latin America connected her to "many people who read the Bible in the way [she] did" and situated her in a rich learning environment of social and political struggle.

Susan's upbringing was decidedly different from Peggy's. Her mother was a surgical nurse and her father was a prominent patent and trademark attorney, both of whom were "determinedly upwardly mobile". She attended a private Christian middle school and a Catholic high school, both of which embedded a sense of privilege and a mistrust of Christianity. This cocoon of privilege carried Susan through college degrees, international work opportunities, marriage, and the birth of her children. Giving up her career, she became a stay-at-home mom while her husband provided an income. As she recounts of this time, "we were confidently middle class". However, this 'happy time' came to an end when her husband was laid off in 2001. Originally, they were so confident about finding work they "didn't even go down to the unemployment office and file for benefits". However, months passed, savings ran out and Susan and her husband eventually filed for social benefits. She discusses this time as "a rude awakening to the realities that many families face", but also a time of humiliation, anger and confusion. Although she felt that she "had failed", she also felt that "the 'social contract' [she] had believed in her life had been broken, even though [she] had fulfilled all the terms and obligations associated with this contract". As she admits, at that time she "believed in the standard myths – get an education, work hard and you will get ahead". In retrospect she recognizes a "myopic existence with regards to social justice issues". Although Susan and her husband were able to get back on their feet financially, this brush with poverty woke her up to 'how difficult it must be for people day in/day out to deal with limited opportunity and resources'.

The authors' stories describe distinct paths in their commitment to social justice, shaped by varied experiences. In the next two sections we articulate two aspects of complexity thinking and three social movement learning theories that inform an understanding of how learning a commitment to social justice emerged.

### **Co-emergence**

Enactivism is a learning theory set forth by Maturana and Varela (1987) which asserts cognition depends on experiences that come from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities embedded in biological, psychological and cultural environments. This embedment is multi-directional in that learners learn from their environment and their environment learns from them. This is called 'co-emergence' (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1993) and represents a structural coupling between the learner and the environment which enacts change in both.

Within this research study, the most prominent aspect of co-emergence was in the articulation and actualization of the research itself. Peggy and Susan had known each other for years and had many conversations regarding social justice orientations. However, it was not until each read the other's journal that it was evident that they came from radically different backgrounds. In early conversations, it was evident that Peggy's commitment had been shaped by her participation in social movements and that learning in social movements was pivotal to a social justice orientation. However, Susan had never been involved in social movements and felt

that life challenges, reflection and interactions with people and ideas had shaped her commitment to social justice. With two such different backgrounds, how can we talk about the development of our commitment in a way that promotes shared understanding?

Davis and Sumara (1997) discuss co-emergence through the analogy of a conversation. Although you may enter a conversation with a set viewpoint about what will be discussed, the individuals involved respond to the conversation while simultaneously shaping it. In the same way, this research project was shaped by our different narratives, just as our theoretical lenses required us to consider our stories in new and different ways. Thus, the data and our understanding of the data co-emerged.

Furthermore, Peggy and Susan recognized that while their commitments to social justice were shaped in different ways, each of their commitments co-emerged within their lived environment. For Peggy, this environment included socially conscious parents, growing up in a hotbed of political activism, a strong commitment to liberation theology, and periods of work and study in Latin America. These events, people and interactions affected Peggy, just as she affected them. On the other hand, Susan grew up in a conservative upper-middle class family. The lack of social consciousness in her family, pressures toward upward mobility and a propensity toward individualism also shaped her social consciousness, albeit more at a psychological level than at the social level that had shaped Peggy. For Susan, the lack of social consciousness in her family limited early understandings of social justice whereas the strong social justice influence of Peggy's parents enabled this understanding.

#### *Nested Levels*

Complexity thinking posits that a learner is "simultaneously a coherent unity, a complex of interacting unities, or a part of a grander unity" (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 14). This "intra-theory" enables us to explore learning at six levels from the cellular to the species, using multiple theoretical frameworks (Davis & Sumara, 2006). We use one learning experience from each of our stories to demonstrate how we can begin to understand simultaneous learning processes using this nested level concept.

The data collection methods used in this study did not allow us to study the bodily subsystems level of learning, but recent research in neurology suggests promising avenues for future studies, especially deepening our knowledge of the brain's primarily analogic way of understanding and the "radical contextuality" of the brain, rooted in a body which remembers species learning and individual learning (Davis et al, 2008, p. 110).

At the second level of the person, Davis and Sumara (2006) suggest the use of psychological and learning theories which help us understand learning as a cognitive process. For example, constructivism explains how Peggy "made meaning" of her reading of Luke, connecting it to prior experience and knowledge and being able to see its application to her life. Susan's experience applying for government assistance was a "disorienting dilemma" which sparked a transformative learning experience (Mezirow, 1991). However, as we will see by examining the larger contexts for this learning, these learning theories do not fully explain our learning.

Davis and Sumara's (2006) third level, collectivities, groups a variety of interactions between an individual learner and other beings. In Peggy's learning experience, this level included interaction with catechism students and pastor and larger social movements in her community. The conversations about what the text meant were shaped by the struggles for social justice going on around her. Susan's interactions at the level of collectivities were primarily with the social welfare system and the worker who "just stared right through me" and treated her as a

formula. The humiliation of the experience and the process of “struggling to get by” connected her to others she saw in the same position and was key in shaping her awareness of social injustice.

It is difficult to separate the fourth level of culture from the third level of collectivities, because the discourse and structures of the culture necessarily enable and constrain the interactions of people. That said, we can make use of a range of anthropological and sociocultural theories to understand learning at this level. Peggy’s reading of Luke was shaped by visions of social and environmental justice which challenged a traditional JudeoChristian worldview. Susan’s interaction with the social worker in 2001 was embedded in the larger discourse of welfare queens, attacks on “big government,” and self-sufficiency narratives, which pushed against her acceptance of “American Dream” narratives. The transformative nature of this learning event was embedded in a social context that charged the interaction with feelings of humiliation and failure, but enabled her to connect with others whose life experience was contradicted by this discourse.

Davis and Sumara’s fifth and sixth levels, the species and the biosphere, were too large for the scope of this research project. However, they remind us as researchers that learners are embedded in a reality even larger than the society which shapes learning. Ecological theories of learning can point us to ways in which this interconnectedness affects learning.

We found that looking at several levels of learning simultaneously was very helpful. We also found that it was very difficult to separate out the learning at different levels. For example, the role of society in shaping language has impacts on how individuals make meaning using those language structures. How is species learning that we carry in our DNA enacted in our daily lives? This very difficulty shows why the use of nested levels is so important for understanding how our learning processes are happening in so many ways simultaneously.

#### *Social Movement Learning Theories*

Because we set out to explore the learning of a commitment to social change, we include here some theories of learning in social movements that we found help explain our learning. Using similar terminology of learning political consciousness, Chovanec (2009) found that the activists she studied developed their consciousness through two processes: early political socialization and integration through active engagement. For Peggy, this framework fits well to explain her childhood experiences and the development of her commitment through socialization processes. She integrated this commitment through her own active engagement with social movement groups in adulthood. This framework does not fit as well for Susan, although Chovanec mentions that most adult education literature is concerned with transformation, a framework that appears to fit better for Susan as she has developed her commitment through adulthood in a series of transformative experiences.

The approaches of Kilgore (1999) and Gouin (2009) fit well with the complexity lens. Kilgore emphasizes the need to look at individual learning and collective learning in social movements. Gouin builds on Foley’s (1995) theory of learning in social action in two ways. She stresses the need to analyze interlocking systems of oppression and to connect the levels of personal experience with learning in collectivities. The complexity lens of nested levels assists with this process of understanding personal experience in a politicized rather than individualized or decontextualized way. Peggy’s reading of the Biblical text is situated in a political and gendered context that radicalizes the meaning of the text. Susan’s experience of seeking assistance is politicized by the economic relations of the dot.com bust and the victimization of recipients of public assistance.

Sandlin and Walther's (2009) exploration of identity formation also provides a helpful framework for understanding our learning. Building on earlier work on moral identity, collective identity, and movement identity, they found participants in the voluntary simplicity movement had a collective identity, but few had developed a movement identity that propelled them to actions for structural change. In Peggy's case, she has a strong individual moral identity, a collective identity as part of specific groups, and a movement identity that has enabled participation in various social movement struggles. Susan's learning experiences have been more individual and while she has a clear moral identity, she is more similar to the participants in Sandlin and Walther's study who have not taken political action for structural change through a movement identity. So while both have a commitment to social justice, the movement identity theoretical framework would suggest that collective learning experiences could be more likely to lead to development of a movement identity.

### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

This study suggests the usefulness of complexity thinking to expand adult learning theory with an integrative framework that enables us to understand and describe learning as a co-emergent process, occurring at multiple levels simultaneously. Co-emergence addresses the troublesome divide between individuals and their context which has plagued learning theories. Understanding that humans learn in co-emergence with their contexts can lead us to develop more thorough and richer descriptions of how learning is shaped by the setting in which it occurs, on multiple levels, and how the learning process simultaneously shapes the world. This study also supports Fenwick's (2003) suggestion that complexity thinking can be a useful framework for understanding learning in social movements.

As practitioners, our teaching is enhanced when we are aware that learning is happening at multiple interactive levels, from the neurological to the social and cultural. In addition, educators can strive to create co-emergent learning processes in their teaching learning settings. (See Davis et al (2008), chapters 10-12 for specific strategies to enable co-emergence in a teaching/learning setting.)

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